



Over 100 Rabid Animals and Counting -- Officials Launch Education Efforts, Poster Contest To Raise Rabies Awareness

First Annual World Rabies Day September 8, 2007

Contact: Janey Pearl, ADHS 602-364-1201

Sept. 6, 2007 -- Arizona has recorded more than 100 rabid animals this year, prompting health officials to ramp up education efforts to protect children from exposure to rabies.

While it is estimated that less than 1% of healthy bats are infected with rabies, 25 sick bats in Arizona have been confirmed to be infected with rabies in August alone.

The Arizona Department of Health Services and the Phoenix Zoo are launching a poster contest for school children to raise awareness about the dangers of rabid animals and to commemorate the first annual World Rabies Day, scheduled for Sept. 8.

"Many rabies exposures involve kids playing with bats," said Elisabeth Lawaczeck, state Public Health Veterinarian. "Most of these exposures are preventable through education. That's why we're encouraging school children across Arizona to become more aware about rabies and to respect wildlife from a distance."

So far this year, there have been 45 humans exposed: 35 were rabid bat exposures, 7 were bobcat exposures, and 3 were fox exposures.

Bats serve as the most important source of rabies exposure to pets and humans in the United States. In August, a river runner was bitten by a bat while loading his boat. A day later, the bat tested positive for rabies at the State Health Lab. Since the river runner had continued with his river trip, the National Park Service flew him out of the Canyon for rabies treatment in Flagstaff.

Even in the heart of Phoenix, several rabid bats are found by children and pets each year. In an effort to educate children on rabies, several efforts are underway:

- Arizona Department of Health Services is working with the Arizona Game & Fish Department to produce an educational video for children on the benefits of bats in nature and to teach children to not touch or play with a bat found on the ground.
- Arizona Department of Health Services is encouraging teachers to remind children to not touch bats or other wildlife through a rabies education poster contest. Additional entries of school children's posters are needed for the contest.
- Maricopa County Animal Care & Control has produced an educational comic book on bats and rabies in English and Spanish.

More than 55,000 people, mostly in Africa and Asia, die from rabies every year-- a rate of one person every ten minutes. In the United States, only two to three people die each year from rabies exposure. The last rabies related death recorded in Arizona was in 1981, from a dog bite of an Arizona resident while visiting Sonora, Mexico. The last human rabies death acquired in Arizona was in 1970 in a 9 year old who was bitten several times by a skunk in Apache County.

The most important source of rabies in humans in other parts of the world is from uncontrolled rabies in dogs. This large impact of rabies on human health in Asia and Africa is due to a lack of animal control infrastructure, lack of rabies vaccination of dogs, and the unavailability of rabies vaccination for humans after an animal bite.

Prior to the 1960s, the dog variant of rabies virus was still present in the U.S., with approximately 3,000 to 4,000 dogs and cats infected with rabies each year. Animal control agencies played a vital role in eliminating rabies from dogs in the U.S. and still play an important role in preventing rabies from becoming a common infection in dogs and cats in the U.S. by:

- controlling the number of strays
- adopting out spayed/neutered pets that are vaccinated
- enforcing local leash laws
- providing free or low cost rabies vaccination clinics
- educating residents on rabies & responsible care of pets

Animal control agencies and animal shelter operators from across the state receive training and exchange ideas on rabies control and animal law enforcement topics through biannual conferences conducted by the Association of Rabies and Animal Control Enforcement Agents of Arizona (ARACEAA).

Rabies is still a threat to wildlife health in Arizona and thus pet health, as rabies is still a frequent infection in bats, skunks, and foxes. More than 90% of all animal cases in the U.S. occur in wildlife. Rabies epizootics (or outbreaks in animals) occur in skunks and foxes primarily in central and southeastern Arizona (counties of Cochise, Gila, Graham, Greenlee, Pima, Pinal, Santa Cruz, and Yavapai). Rabies has also been documented in foxes in northern Maricopa County where the southern boundaries of Tonto National Forest interface with the northern reaches of Cave Creek and Carefree.

For information on World Rabies Day events planned in Arizona, please visit:
www.azdhs.gov, or call your local animal control agency or the Arizona Department of
Health Services at (602) 364-4562